

“The Enormous Failure of Nature”: Famine and Society in the Nineteenth Century Introductory Notes

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This miscellany is composed predominantly of papers that were presented to the “Nineteenth-Century European Famines in Context” symposium, held at the Bank of Finland’s Museum (*Rahamuseo*) in Helsinki, in December 2015.¹ The Helsinki meeting was the second of four international events arranged by the International Network of Irish Famine Studies [INIFS] between April 2015 and April 2017, each of which has had a different theme and associated publication.² Under the leadership of Marguérite Corporaal (Radboud University, Nijmegen), with co-directors Peter Gray (Queens University Belfast), Oona Frawley and Luke Gibbons (NUI Maynooth) and Andrew Newby (University of Helsinki), the network received major funding from NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) in 2014.

INIFS connects scholars conducting innovative research on the Great Irish Famine, and seeks to develop the interdisciplinary dialogues and methodologies necessary to face four central challenges in the field. These are: (i) comparative analyses of the media through which the legacy of the Famine was transmitted; (ii) an investigation of the imperial power structures that shaped the progression and representations of the Famine; (iii) an examination of the evolution of transatlantic and transpacific diasporas of Famine emigrants; and, (iv) parallel studies of the Great Hunger and famines taking place in other temporal and geographical contexts but under analogous conditions. The Helsinki symposium focussed particularly on the fourth of these challenges, and brought together researchers from a variety of national and disciplinary backgrounds.

1 <<http://www.ru.nl/irishfaminenetwork/meetings/>> (accessed 1 Mar. 2017)

2 In addition to the current volume see King & Corporaal, 2017; Corporaal, Mark-Fitzgerald & Frawley, 2017 (from the Nijmegen and Maynooth conferences respectively). A publication from Belfast (April 2017) will be released in due course.

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Despite the 1860s Finnish famine being recognised as one of Europe's final large-scale mortality crises, international relations scholar Vanessa Pupavac has noted that it remains “virtually unknown” abroad, a point which was reinforced by Cormac Ó Gráda's claim that it “received little attention at the time and is rarely discussed or analysed outside Finland.”³ Moreover, it has been suggested regularly in recent years that Irish famine studies can be strengthened by more systematic comparative work.⁴ As a means of addressing these historiographical issues, a provisional agenda for comparative Finnish-Irish famine studies was published in 2015, and a thematic priority of the Helsinki meeting was to therefore to explore and analyse comparisons and contrasts between these “Great Famines”, and facilitate the development of partnerships which could produce collaborative research long after the end of the current project.⁵ While acknowledging the importance and potential of a bilateral comparative dialogue, however, it was considered vital to add further context, including contributions on the Scottish Highlands, Estonia, and Lithuania. Furthermore, although Özge Ertem and David Ludvigsson were unfortunately absent from the seminar, their important work on (respectively) the Ottoman Empire and Sweden has been included in the final collection.

Reports from the second half of the nineteenth century reinforce the idea that these crises cannot be studied exclusively on a national level. For example, as the Great Finnish Famine entered its most destructive phase in January 1868, the London *Standard* newspaper recognised a much larger-scale – potentially global – humanitarian crisis.

No phenomenon of the modern age is more remarkable than the enormous failure of nature in many countries of Europe, Africa and Asia. From all quarters we have heard, or still hear, the appalling cry of famine... It is impossible to suggest to eyes that have not witnessed them the reality of the horrors consequent on these fell visitations. Among ourselves the thought of a few wretched beings perishing of starvation in the winter time causes society to shudder, and the bare fact that a lonely and scattered population were, a little ago, dying of hunger in the glens of Connemara, sufficed to turn a full stream of pity and help towards those barren districts. But the misery we now speak of it the scourge of millions; the victims are not to be counted; the food of whole provinces has been blighted; and the ravage spreads like a pestilence, traversing rivers and mountains, invading frontiers, laying the land desolate for hundreds of miles.⁶

While contemporary accounts in the nineteenth century seemed well aware of the international context of these catastrophes subsequent historiographies

3 Pupavac, 2014, 82; Ó Gráda, 2015, 107.

4 Ó Ciosáin, 2013, 705; Curran et al., 2015, 2–3.

5 Newby & Myllyntaus, 2015, 145–65.

6 *The Standard*, 13 Jan. 1868.

of famine have developed very much within national paradigms.⁷ Bill Kissane's recent work on civil war has, however, provided an excellent model for how a historical topic can be developed from (i) a national focus to (ii) a comparative focus (again, in Kissane's case this was a Finnish-Irish comparison), using the lessons learned from the bilateral comparison to (iii) construct a much broader transnational framework.⁸ Such an approach is absolutely possible in the field of historical famine studies.⁹ There are consistent themes which emerge in various crises: the role of societal structures in exacerbating or easing the natural element of the disaster; political agency; the increase in social unrest / dislocation (and subsequent downplaying e.g. of incidences of crime in famine societies); the role of domestic and international philanthropy; the tension between charity and "self-help"; the international / imperial political context; commemoration and representation. This volume contains reflections on all of these themes, highlighting some of the latest research on famine in the nineteenth century. The articles make innovative contributions to "national" famine narratives, but also offer insights which provide a basis for new comparative work.

Today, as perhaps befits a "father of the nation", Johan Vilhelm Snellman's statue looks out sternly from the main entrance of the Bank of Finland. A key difference between Finland and Ireland in the nineteenth century was that Finland's devolved position within the Russian Empire had allowed it, by the 1860s, to create that Central Bank and develop independent fiscal policies.¹⁰ As the finance minister in the 1860s, it was Snellman who occupied a role similar to that fulfilled by Charles Trevelyan in Ireland twenty years earlier. And yet, the reputations of the two men could scarcely be more divergent. Even though the economic and trade policies enacted by Snellman and his colleagues did not prevent the mortality crisis of 1867-68, their emphasis on cultural and economic self-sufficiency meant that it was preferable for Finland to "fail alone, rather than be saved by Russian intervention".¹¹

Declan Curran's article examines the impact of the Bankers (Ireland) Act of 1845, a local variation of Britain's restrictive monetary regime, imposed on Ireland by the parliament in London. In particular, the Curran ponders the question of whether such a policy was appropriate during a time of famine. Snellman also features

7 Two other current research networks are engaged in pioneering transnational famine research. The "Hunger Draws The Map" project, based at the University of Oxford and funded by the Leverhulme Trust (2016-18), analyses the famines that struck Europe during and immediately after World War One. The research group "COMPOT – Famines in Historical Context", funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS) and based at the University of Turku, has also held several workshops and is making an important contribution to theorizing famine in a transnational context. This includes the key question of what actually constitutes famine, and the terms used in different languages. For these networks, see <http://greatwar.history.ox.ac.uk/?page_id=2202> and <https://www.utu.fi/fi/yksikot/hum/yksikot/suomenhistoria/tutkimus/projektit/Sivut/COMPOT_nalanhataprojekti.aspx>

8 Kissane, 2000a; Kissane, 2000b, Kissane, 2013; Kissane, 2016.

9 Ó Gráda, 2009, and Ó Gráda, 2015, have already demonstrated this potential.

10 Newby & Myllyntaus, 2015, 153.

11 Newby, 2014b, 394.

prominently in **Heidi Reese’s** analysis of the Helsinki administration’s handling of the famine. Many of Reese’s observations resonate strongly with Irish readers, such as the policy that gratuitous aid should be withheld for fear of de-moralizing the people (an idea already apparent in the Quaker aid distributed in Finland a decade earlier).¹² Some comments emanating from the Finnish elite – such as the Governor of Mikkeli Province’s hope that the “harsh hunger” would educate the people in “many things” – also hark back to British attitudes towards Ireland, particularly the idea of, in David Nally’s phrase, “imposing civility”.¹³ Stripped to a large degree of the racial and national element which marked metropolitan Victorian attitudes towards both Irish and Scottish Highland Celts, these comments suggest a potential disconnect along class lines, or between metropole and province, which was subsequently erased in an overarching narrative of “Finnishness”. From a Finnish perspective, it is worth considering why Snellman’s reputation is so overwhelmingly, though not by any means universally, positive. The Irish reader, however, might also ponder whether having a Home Rule administration in the 1840s would simply have meant having economic policies enacted by a local “Trevelyan”.

Social insecurity is also a theme that runs through **Ciarán Reilly’s** study of the cottiers of Tullygarvey, Co. Cavan, in an excellent example of how previously unused archival sources can be used not only to build up a picture of a particular locality, but also posit much broader conclusions. The importance of delving in to this under-researched stratum of Irish agricultural society is highlighted by recent work on the Finnish case, which has stressed the huge increase in the class of landless labourers in the 1800s, a development which also had lethal implications for famine-era mortality.¹⁴ The theme of social precarity is also addressed in **Miikka Voutilainen’s** innovative analysis of marriage and household structure in Finland on the eve of the Great Hunger Years. Although recent studies have implied that Finland’s demographic structure was dominated by the preventive check, Voutilainen argues that the recurrence of famine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tends to undermine the argument that such behaviour was necessarily a socio-economic safeguard. In examining the structure of households, Voutilainen presents new theories around the interplay between preventive checks and rural precarity.

Although 1867-68 is arguably best remembered for the demographic catastrophe that hit Finland, the crisis was generally framed by contemporaries as part of a wider crisis that also affected Swedish Norrland (to Finland’s north-west), and many parts of the Russian Empire, including the Baltic Provinces. **Kersti Lust’s** article on famine relief in Estland and Livland raises important questions about regional and imperial structures, as well as the more general notion – recently reformulated by Norbert Götz in the context of nineteenth-century European famines – of a “moral

12 Newby, 2015, 112.

13 Nally, 2011, 129–73.

14 Häkkinen & Forsberg, 2015, 105–6; Voutilainen, 2015, 125.

economy”.¹⁵ In a narrative that has strong echoes of the Irish situation – not only in the 1840s but also, for example, during the more localised *Gorta Beag* of 1879–80 – Lust explores the limits of state intervention, the way in which traditional “community” institutions were able to cope with a modernising economy, and the persistence or otherwise of paternalistic bonds between nobility and peasantry.

A notable feature of the famines which affected Europe in the late 1860s was the extent to which international aid criss-crossed the continent. This fundraising took place on a personal, institutional and even state level, and highlights a complex array of motivations, linked to trade links, geopolitical interests, class, ethnic or religious solidarities, and in some cases simple “Christian charity.” Some of this activity is reflected in **Özge Ertem**’s article on two famines which hit Anatolia in the Ottoman Empire (1873–75 and 1879–81), both of which received considerable international attention and demands for “a large amount of private benevolence” to be “called in to immediate exercise”.¹⁶ Again, this account of state institutions struggling with the crisis, of a breakdown in social solidarity, and the terms on which charity was provided, has resonances with Finland, Ireland and many other societies.¹⁷ Vitally, Ertem points out some of the self-interest inherent in ostensibly philanthropic state actions, and a transnational study of famine relief as a facet of international relations in the nineteenth century seems likely to be a fruitful area for future exploration.

The Great Famine hit Finland in the aftermath of the Crimean War, just as its political leaders were developing a national identity that focussed on hard work, education, and adherence to the law. This last feature was key in distinguishing the Finnish national movement from those rebellious peoples such as the Polish or the Irish, and the Turku-based newspaper *Aura* made the explicit point in 1894 that:

The position of the Finnish people cannot be compared with that of 1880s Ireland... observance of the law and a sense of justice have always been the Finnish people’s finest properties... Even during the great famine [1867–8], when huge quantities of people died from lack of bread, even though they had been very hard-working, they did not become openly violent [or] steal other people’s property, and [it was] even less likely that they would plot in secret in order to hurt others.¹⁸

Miikka Vuorela’s article takes this persistent assertion about Finland’s Great Famine Years and scrutinises it with fascinating results, offering suggestions as to why, despite a rise in crime against property, interpersonal violence did not *appear* to increase significantly in the 1860s.

The memory and memorialization of famine is a theme that has blossomed in recent years, not least because of the potential for comparison between the

15 Götz, 2015, 155–8.

16 *Famine in Asia Minor: Appeal* dated Edinburgh, 6th November 1874. Accessed via *Haithi Trust*.

17 Newby, 2014a, 61; Newby, 2015, 107; Kinealy, 2013, 279.

18 *Aura*, 18 Apr. 1894.

Irish and Ukrainian cases.¹⁹ The articles by **David Ludvigsson** (on Sweden) and **Andrew Newby** (on Finland) both deal with issues of memory and representation of the hunger years of the 1860s. In his analysis of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation’s 1977 documentary *Ett satans år*, Ludvigsson notes the contemporary social context which coloured the representation of the Norrland famine. Newby’s interim report on memorials to Great Hunger Years, likewise, highlights the idea that monuments tell us as much about the society that erected them as the events that they commemorate.

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19 Noack et al., 2012.

20 “The Terrible Visitation”: Famine in Finland and Ireland – Transnational, Comparative and Long Term Perspectives: 2012–17, PI Dr. Andrew G. Newby; Finnish Harvest Failures and Famines in the International Context: 2012–16, PI Prof. Timo Myllyntaus. Moreover, under the auspices of the Finnish Centre of Excellence in Historical Research, it facilitated a series of five “Finland in Comparison” workshops between 2011 and 2015.

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